

University of Wales Trinity Saint David - School of Social Justice and Inclusion

Student number: 1503073

MA Children and Young People (Health and Well-being)

Research proposal:

Connecting the dots: how can aspirations be raised in young people through the life sciences sector?

The motivation for this study stems from several factors; the researcher lives in an area of high unemployment and deprivation. This is evidenced in several data studies. For example, the local primary school has a significantly higher percentage of pupils in receipt of free school meals at 30%, with the national average at 18% (Estyn, 2018). Historically, the Amman Valley was an industrious area, with plenty of employment opportunities, and for a variety of reasons, the economy has now changed, with 5% of all those between the ages of 18-25 in receipt of out of work benefits; this figure is slightly higher than the national average of 4.6% (Nomis, 2019), and 8.9% of all Carmarthenshire residents are in receipt of incapacity benefits, with the national average at 8.4% (Nomis, 2019).

There are many interesting potential avenues that the researcher could investigate with these figures, including whether government policy changes have led to an increase in the number of individuals claiming sickness related benefits or whether perhaps people are more likely to claim benefits to be better off financially due to the lack of employment opportunity in the region. These are all interesting topics, however, the researcher is focused on one particular avenue and that is employment opportunities in the life sciences and health innovation sector, and whether these could be an antidote to the number of young people in Carmarthenshire who are not in education employment or training (NEET). Figures for 2018 showed that nearly 5% of all school leavers in Carmarthenshire ended up becoming NEET (Careers Wales, 2018).

The data for Carmarthenshire currently shows that the level of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) has fallen since the

Carmarthenshire 11-19 curriculum review targets were set in 2016, (Morden, 2016). This shows that they have achieved their target of lowering NEETs for the age group 16-18. Conversely, they have not achieved their target for lowering the number of NEET young people aged 19-24; the age at which learners will leave further education and progress on to higher education. The failure to lower the number of NEETs at this age could be due to a number of factors, and the following could be why:

Further education is seen as a potential stopgap, with financial incentives for parents, guardians, and for the learners to pursue progression to college or sixth form. Young people may, at the point of leaving further education (6th form or further education college), then realise at the end of this period of education, that their current learning pathway may not help them to achieve their aspirations of going to university or into their preferred choice of employment. They may also be faced with then having to find another job, perhaps with less opportunities for promotion, and in a community where employment is sparse and public transport limited, the prospects are not good.

Careers Wales (2018) statistics for Carmarthenshire show that 4.9% of those leaving year thirteen last year ended up NEET. On the APS basis, there is an increase in the number of young people who were found to be NEET for the year ending in the first quarter of 2019, 16.2% of 19 to 24 year olds were estimated to be NEET, compared with 14.2 per cent for the first quarter of 2018 (Welsh Government, 2019). There could potentially be a number of reasons for these figures. One of these potential theories is that as a nation, we are preparing our children and young people for an economy that does not exist anymore. The economy has changed, but yet, the education sector is still “selling” the same product: if you work hard in school, you will get a good job, and yet, the empirical evidence paints a very different picture. 50.2% of young people in the UK are educated up to degree level, and the 50% target set by former Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1999, (Department for Education, 2019, Coughlan, 2019) has been succeeded as of 2019. Unemployment remains high in spite of these figures. The educational systems’s seeming rhetoric regarding higher academic achievement and increased opportunities in employment and industry

seem to be unfounded. In the Amman Valley, the feeling on the street is that there is little opportunity, and as stated previously, empirical data from the Welsh Government (2019) shows that the number of young people aged 19-24 who are not in education, employment or training has increased in the last year, and it is these figures that drive the research question and hypothesis for this particular study. This is not just an Amman Valley problem, but a national problem. It is more than a localised issue, unique to one community, but rather, this study is looking at a small geography, with a view to perhaps looking towards a more nationalised study in the future. This study seeks to intercept the NEET problems before the young person reaches that age group; 19-24. This study will begin with sixteen year olds, and whether or not an intervention at this stage would be likely to minimise the number of young people who are NEET in the 19-24 age group.

The hypothesis for this study is that young people aged sixteen and over who are moving on from education might not be aware of the career opportunities available to them in the life sciences and health innovation sector. Health innovation is a growing industry with over three hundred and fifty companies in Wales. Health innovation covers a vast area, from wearable tech to monitor health, to artificial intelligence and state of the art cancer diagnostics. Young people who want to work in the health and social care or the sciences industry might not even be aware that these companies exist and that they often cannot fill their vacancies. In the researchers' professional experience, young people wanting to work in the "helping professions" are perhaps limited to being nurses or care workers and there is far greater opportunity available. This research would also look at whether a third party organisation may be able to connect young people to the health innovation companies, and whether this could help with the rising number of NEET young people in Wales in the 19-24 years age group.

Methodology

Schwandt (2001) states that a paradigm is a worldview that is representative of values and beliefs that help to shape and guide how problems are solved in a particular discipline.

It is vital that researchers do not allow their own personal bias affect their research. It must be unequivocally fair and balanced; the danger in allowing personal bias or values to influence the research is that at best, the research can only be applied to a very small group or situation, and may not be as meaningful or robust. That said, researchers will have some sort of question or proverbial “bone” to pick so to speak as a catalyst to their research; this could be as a result of a personal experience which led to the development of the research question.

The researcher is planning to use mixed methods to collect the necessary data for this project. The intended data collection methods are, online surveys, focus groups, and semi structured interviews. It may be that some of these intended data collection tools might not yield the data that the researcher is looking for, or it may be apparent at some points during the research that the method intended to be used at a given point might not be appropriate. These issues could be potential limitations to this study. For example, the online questionnaire might have very little uptake, or may have participants who skip all the questions for reasons unknown. The best course of action at this point might be to include some of the data in the finished research project with an explanation of why this limited the data collection, or perhaps the researcher may pursue another data collection method. Interviews and focus groups can yield meaningful information which figures and pie charts alone cannot. This type of data can provide depth to the numbers and can even provide the backstory to the figures: *“In seeking a very complete response, interviews and focus groups are most likely to provide the depth of information that might be useful. Focus groups and interviews are also the best methods to resolve seemingly conflicting information, because the researcher has the direct opportunity to ask about the apparent conflict”*, (Harrell and Bradley, 2008, p.17). What this means is that any

information not explained by the data can be explored with the young people through meaningful discussions.

The reason that the researcher favours semi structured interviews is that this research project is qualitative in nature and as a result, the researcher is looking for rich depth in the data. This means collecting amongst other pieces of information, what people think, feel and believe. This research does not look at numbers alone, but what matters to people, what their experiences are, and ultimately, what their aspirations are. Partington (2001) states that: *“the advantage of the semi-structured interview is that the interviewer is in control of the process of obtaining information from the interviewee, but is free to follow new leads as they arise.”* (Partington, 2001, p. 33.). This really is the crux of the matter. There are planned questions that the researcher is intending to ask (these questions will be the same for both the focus groups and the interviews as the researcher wants to note whether the presence of peers changes their responses, please see section 4 in the appendices), but if a topic arises during the interviews or focus groups that is interesting or particularly important in answering the research question, then the researcher does not want to be bound by a rigid set of questions. Real life is not rigid and this research project will be reflective of that.

The researcher will be adopting a pragmatic constructivist paradigm to conduct this research, and as aforementioned about values and personal bias, it is the researcher's belief that demographic, geography, and lack of awareness and knowledge about careers in the life sciences sector which could potentially affect aspirations in the locality which the research refers to. It is vital that the researcher conducts their enquiries from a posture of neutrality, and not allow any personal bias or belief affect the study in any way, (Chilisa and Kawulich, Nd). In particular, the exact paradigm of this research project will be constructivist, but with a pragmatic approach. The reason for this is because pragmatic constructivism provides the necessary lens that the researcher can explain their research and how they can also be understood, (Haas and Haas, 2002).

According to Flick (2015), another vital aspect related to the consideration of qualitative research methods is that qualitative research utilizes three approaches; an attempt is made by the researcher to understand the subjective meaning of participants' experiences and realities, that underlying vulnerabilities and conflicts may influence the experience of the research participants, and thirdly, the social practices of the participants. Qualitative research is essentially an exploration and discussion about new aspects of a situation under analysis. Maintaining openness is the key, and not being too rigid or standardised allows the researcher the freedom in following new leads as and when they arise, whilst also finding new ground. This is why the researcher has chosen semi structured interviews as the predominant means of data collection, because the decision about whether or not to use qualitative or quantitative data collection methods should be based on the interest of the researcher, the research topic, and the issues involved (Flick, 2015). Interviews is another way that a constructivist researcher collects their data effectively, due to the fact that a person's truth or viewpoint, particularly when trying to measure aspirations, is subjective. Semi structured interviews are also of benefit to the researcher in this instance due to the descriptive nature of the data. This type of descriptive information could not be gathered from numerical data. The use of mixed methods and the qualitative nature of the research supports the constructivist pragmatic posture and worldview of the researcher.

The target age group for the online survey are young people between the ages of 16-24. The intention is that this questionnaire will be available on platforms such as Facebook (where the minimum age for an account is thirteen). Some limitations to this is that there is no real way of controlling the conditions of this questionnaire. This means that some participants may not be of the right age, may lie on the form about their age, or may not be from the target geographical location of Carmarthenshire. Another limitation might be the uptake; the researcher may not have the number of participants necessary to acquire any meaningful data. Ideally, the target number of participants would be around one hundred and fifty to two hundred. This number of participants in the survey would help to give a snapshot of the general feelings surrounding some of the issues. The potential for a larger number of participants

than this to be surveyed would be possible if the researcher had the permission of some of the local schools. For example, Dyffryn Aman and Bro Dinefwr. It would be advantageous to gain ethical approval to survey learners aged sixteen and above in these schools. Please see section 3 in appendices for the intended survey questions. This would also be beneficial for the interviews and focus groups. If the researcher could gain access to learners in the local schools, and also Coleg Sir Gar, in order to interview them and to conduct focus groups, the potential data collection numbers could be in the several hundred. Also the timing of when the interviews and focus groups take place could be pivotal. For example, asking learners during a particularly stressful period of the academic year might greatly affect the responses. It might mean conducting two sets of focus groups and interviews, one at the beginning of the year, and one at the end, and comparing the findings.

This enormous amount of data might be too much for one lone researcher to wade through, however, it would give a far more unbiased and larger generalised overview of aspirations with regards to job opportunities. Meeting with Careers Wales and the Job Centre may also be potential research avenues. Interviewing young people who might be about to sign onto Universal Credit or a work based benefits scheme would also offer the researcher a good foundation with which to begin building a picture of the overall employment aspirations of young people aged 16 and above in the Amman Valley. A downside to this is providing feedback to potentially hundreds, if not thousands of learners and young people should they request it.

Due to the age of some of the target group, in particular, school age young people, the researcher felt that the language on the stock template consent letter from the university was too complicated for them. Also, the amount of written information on the form may seem rather intimidating to young people. Therefore, the researcher has suggested a different consent form and letter that may be beneficial to use should the research project receive the go ahead. It would not be used to intimidate or overload any young person with information; the researcher wants to collaborate with the young people, and not overwhelm them with jargon and academic language.

Again, this example is a suggestion, and if need be, the researcher is happy to explain the consent letter to each participant should the stock university example be the only acceptable consent letter.

Included in the appendices are the following:

Section One - Consent form for participants of the focus groups and interviews.

Section Two - Consent form for parents and guardians of participants who are under the age of eighteen.

Section three - Example of the online survey questions with a forward explanation of consent.

Section Four - Example of the questions for the interviews and focus groups.

Section Five - Example of the RIASC test.

Another limitation for the data collection methods is, as stated previously, that there is the potential with this research project for there to be literally hundreds of participants. For one researcher alone, this may prove to be problematic, especially with regards to maintaining the proper ethical considerations. Once the data has been collected, there is the potential for a large amount of data to sort through and to analyse. Due to the qualitative nature of the research, another limitation might be the subjective nature of the answers. It is therefore vital that the researcher does not misconstrue any answers given in the focus groups. There is also the risk that the answers might be misinterpreted. It could be very difficult to measure aspirations in this way, which is why the online survey is essential with this regard, as the answers are rated one to five, and can be collated into a graph or pie chart. This will provide the visual representation of the actual aspirations. Aspirations also tend to be subjective; what one young person might view as aspirational, another might not, and this is where some of the difficulty lies within the remits of this research. For this

reason, a good uptake and participation rate for the online survey would be beneficial.

There are a number of ethical considerations to this research project, and due to the educational aspect of the research, the ethical guidelines that the researcher will follow will be those from the British Educational Research Association (BERA), (2011). These guidelines will provide the foundational ethical basis for all research activities conducted throughout the process.

Some of the anticipated difficulties and risks to the research project is that it will be vital to gain parental and guardian consent for any participants who are aged under eighteen years of age. It is important to note that none of the participants will be aged under sixteen years old. Not only will it be necessary to ensure the consent of parents and guardians, but also the consent of the participants themselves. The target age for the research participants are those aged between sixteen and twenty four years of age. Those aged eighteen and above will be able to provide their own consent. It is also important to keep in mind that although the parent or guardian might give consent to the participant aged under eighteen (but at least sixteen), the participant may not want to give their consent. In such cases, the participant's consent would be the final word on the matter as forcing a young person to take part in the research would be against BERA guidelines, which we will discuss. Voluntary participation is key to this research, and arguably, to any research project.

Another ethical consideration will be that the young people might present with their own complex needs and vulnerabilities. In this instance, a risk assessment will be necessary. The only potential harm to participants that the researcher can for-see at this point in the research design would be that the discussion of the term 'NEET', along with discussions regarding emotions to do with educational experiences, might potentially invoke negative feelings. It would be best in this instance to ensure full informed consent is gained, and a full explanation given to each participant, in particular their right to withdraw at any time without needing to provide an explanation, and to remain fully informed throughout the research process (BERA, 2011). There are many potential negative connotations associated with the label of

‘NEET’, and it is far from the researcher’s intention to cause upset or frustration to any participant involved in this research.

With regards to the young people’s potential personal challenges and vulnerabilities, point sixteen of the BERA ethical guidelines promotes points three and twelve of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1990), which state that in all activities where children and young people are involved or concerned, their best interests must be the primary concern. The researcher must keep the best interests of their participants at the very core of their research, and not the research itself. Article twelve relates to children and young people being given the freedom to express their views and opinions, and that they should be given an opportunity to freely express these, with activities appropriate to their age and maturity. That is one of the main reasons why the researcher has included focus groups as part of the data collections tools. Point twenty of the BERA guidelines also state that the researcher should work to minimize any discomfort or distress that the research might cause. This could include not discussing sensitive or upsetting content, and allowing the focus groups and interview sessions to be learner led. Again, the young people have the right to withdraw consent at any moment. Sometimes, seemingly innocent or innocuous material might invoke feelings of distress. The researcher must do their utmost to avoid any potentially upsetting material and to ensure adequate background information is sought from the participant prior to conducting the interviews or focus groups. The researcher should change the topic immediately if any hint of distress is visible in the participants.

Another key, if not vital component of the research is that the researcher needs to be DBS checked, and that they do not have any previous convictions. Point nineteen of the BERA ethical guidelines underpins this. It would be completely unthinkable to put any child or young person at risk by allowing an offender to research them in this way.

The researcher feels that the intended methods are at this stage of the research, the most appropriate for the task. There are a number of benefits to using semi structured interviews, focus groups and online surveys as data collection tools.

These methods all cost nothing financially, only the time, availability, and energy of the researcher. There are some limitations however, including the sampling size that could potentially be quite big; a matter which needs serious consideration, including whether acquiring the help of another researcher is an option. Again, the researcher is not being paid to conduct this research and it might be difficult to acquire this additional help without offering to reimburse another researcher for their time. Time constraints is another serious consideration to take into account. The question of whether or not the sampling size could be effectively researched and all the data analysed properly and rigorously within a relatively short amount of time. It also needs to be considered whether access to the young people will be an easy task; will all the records be accessible and will any third party organisation such as Careers Wales or Coleg Sir Gar even be willing to meet with the researcher? These are considerations that need to be taken into account and a contingency plan drawn up in the event that these individuals and/or organisations do not want to meet the researcher, or if the results do not produce the anticipated information. There should also be an exploration into whether life sciences is truly the answer. It would be ignorant to suggest that this sector provides for the aspirations of all young people. There is something for everyone in the life sciences sector, whether they are practical individuals who enjoy hands on tasks (e.g. making prosthetic limbs), or whether they enjoy the creative arts (e.g. graphic design), however, there will be those whose aspirations lie outside this sector. For example, there may be young people who enjoy land based and agricultural activities, or those who enjoy mechanics, or those who enjoy dance or athletics. With this in mind, there will be one last activity that the researcher would ask the young people to engage in, and that would be the RIASC test (Nd). RIASC is an acronym for realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional. Please see the link in appendix five for the example of the test sheet that would be given to the learners and young people. This activity would be conducted during the focus groups. The benefit of giving this test to the learners and young people interviewed and surveyed is that it will hopefully empower them to make the best choices for them. If they do not personally feel that the life sciences sector is for them, then with the BERA guidelines stating that researchers must put the best interests of their participants first, it would seem

only right that this research could help them to identify where their strengths lie in order for them to choose the right career pathways. It is hoped that this research could benefit not only those who want to work in the life sciences sector, but also those who may not. It is not one size fits all, and it would seem a tall order for any sixteen year old to be expected to know what they want to be at thirty.

It might be possible that the young people being surveyed and interviewed may change their minds about what career pathway they want to achieve. There also needs to be a follow up for those participants who decide that they would like to work in the life sciences sector. This research is about facilitating social change, and enlightening young people about the career pathways that are available to them in the life sciences sector, and helping those young people who feel that their aspirations lie outside of this sector, by enabling them to identify what they would like to do. Another aspect of the research is whether there is a means of providing work experience or apprenticeships for the young people who would be interested in working in the life sciences sector; these are all valid questions which the researcher hopes can be answered by conducting the project.

There are numerous strengths and weaknesses to the research, including its originality. There have not been studies done in this specific research area on aspirations, and whether NEET young people and school leavers in the Amman Valley, Carmarthenshire, are aware of careers in the life sciences and what they feel about employment opportunities and careers, including their educational experiences.

This research is also about helping to support school leavers and NEET young people to recognise what their interests and strengths are, and help them to shape and plan their own individual and unique learning pathways. This part of the research will be achieved through the use of the surveys and the focus groups, but mainly through the RIASC test. This test is a fun and inventive way of helping the young person identify their own personal strengths and interests, with the view of pursuing their strengths as a career.

The measuring of aspirations is a subjective and potentially difficult concept to be measured or theorised, however, the subject of the research is in line with the research paradigm chosen by the researcher, that of a constructivist pragmatic standpoint. The research will hopefully be a useful insight into aspirations, and as it currently stands, this research is original in that there is no other published research on this specific topic and in this specific geography. This research will also highlight the difficulties that young people and school leavers face in the employment sector, what their educational experiences are, and will give an ear to their views and feelings, which is beneficial to all who work with children and young people. The benefit of the research will also help life sciences and health innovation tech companies to understand what school leavers and young people know about their sector, which is especially important due to the sector's difficulty in filling their employment vacancies. This will aid these companies to understand how to market their jobs, how to attract interest, and also what young people are looking for. It might be the case that young people do not know these jobs even exist, and if not, why not. This research will aid those involved in this sector to understand what skills young people are leaving school with, and what other skills do they need, if any, to be able to work in this field. It may be the case that young people do not need to go to university for some of these positions, due to there being many apprenticeships available in some of the life sciences companies. It is fair to say that perhaps young people may not even think about the life sciences sector due in part to them not even being aware that careers in this field exist, including for those young people who are more practical and hands on. It might be the case that they have low self esteem and may not feel they are able to get a foot in the door in the sector.

There is definite scope to build upon the findings of this intended research project, and it is the researcher's hope that it will inspire young people to achieve the best they can.

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Appendices

1.

Consent Form for Focus Group and Interviews

I understand that taking part in this study will involve answering questions and discussing my feelings, my career aspirations and my employment and education experiences. This should take approximately no longer than an hour.

I understand that taking part in this study is entirely voluntary and if I want to, that I can withdraw from the study at any time and I will not need to provide a reason.

I understand that I am free to ask questions at any time. I can withdraw or discuss my concerns with the researcher and/or his/her supervisor.

I understand that the information provided by me is confidential. When the research is completed, I will not be identifiable, and I can take part in a follow up feedback session should I wish to.

I understand that at the end of the study I can ask for additional information and feedback. The information I provide will only be used for the research project, and this has been explained to me.

All information will be securely stored and will be destroyed on completion of the research project

I, _____ consent to take part in the study conducted by _____

From the University of Wales Trinity Saint David
under the supervision of **Dr. Nichola Welton**

Signed: _____

Date: _____

2.

Parent/Guardian consent form for participants aged under eighteen

I am the parent/guardian of _____ and I
consent to them participating in a research project conducted by Angharad
Wolsey, an MA student from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, and
supervised by Dr Nichola Welton.

I understand that the researcher is DBS checked. I understand that I can ask
the researcher or their supervisor questions at any time.

I understand that all information provided by _____ will be
confidential, and that they are free to withdraw consent at any time without
providing a reason. I have also been made aware that I can
withdraw _____'s participation in the research at any time due to
them being under eighteen, without providing a reason.

I have been made aware that the researcher will be following the correct
ethical guidelines in conducting this research.

Signed: _____

Relationship to participant: _____

Date: _____

3.

Online survey questions

My name is Angharad Wolsey and I am an MA student at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and I am undertaking a research project about career aspirations among young people aged between 16-24 years of age.

This short online questionnaire is completely confidential and you will not be identifiable in any way. It will take no longer than five minutes.

You are not required to answer all the questions if you do not want to, and you can withdraw from it at any time without giving a reason.

By taking part in this questionnaire, you are giving your consent to participate in the research, and the answers you give will only be for the purposes of this research project. All data will be destroyed on completion of this project.

You can contact me at any time to discuss this research:

1503073@student.uwtsd.ac.uk

Q1. I will go to University.

Please rate from 1-5 (5 being most likely and 1 being not likely at all).

Q2. I will get a good job.

Please rate from 1-5 (5 being most likely and 1 being not likely at all).

Q3. I will get a good job in Wales.

Please rate from 1-5 (5 being most likely and 1 being not likely at all).

Q4: I think there are good job opportunities in Wales.

Please rate from 1-5 (5 being most likely and 1 being not likely at all).

Q5: I need qualifications to get a good job:

Please rate from 1-5 (5 being most likely and 1 being not likely at all).

Q6: What age group are you in? Please choose one.

- 16 - 18
- 18-21
- 22-24

Thank you for taking part!

4.

Sample of Focus Group and Interview Questions

- When you were small, what did you want to be when you grew up?
- Tell me about what school was like for you.
- When we talk about school and education, what emotions do you feel?
- How do you feel these experiences have affected what you want to do career wise?
- What are your hopes for the future?
- If I said the words “life sciences”, what do you think I’m talking about?
- Do you know what sort of jobs you could do in this sector?
- Do you think you would like to have some work experience in this sector?

5.

The RIASC test

Please click the link below:

<https://www.hawaiipublicschools.org/DOE%20Forms/CTE/RIASEC.pdf>